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Implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the working methods of the Commission on the Status of Women

Report of the Secretary-General

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Introduction

1. The present report on the working methods of the Commission on the Status of Women has been prepared in accordance with General Assembly resolution 55/71 of 4 December 2000, taking into account the existing mandate of the Commission and other relevant resolutions. The report looks at ways of enhancing the working methods of the Commission to make it more effective in formulating policies and in monitoring the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action[1] and outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the Assembly,[2] as well as in its catalytic role in mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes.

I. The mandate of the Commission

2. The Commission's current mandate is based on the original mandate stipulated in Economic and Social Council resolutions 11 (II) of 21 June 1946 and 48 (IV) of 29 March 1947. As stated in the original mandate, the functions of the Commission are to prepare recommendations and reports to the Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, social and educational fields. The Commission also makes recommendations to the Council on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights with the object of implementing the principle that men and women shall have equal rights, and to develop proposals to give effect to such recommendations. In Council resolution 1987/22 of 26 May 1987, the Commission's mandate was expanded by the Council to include the functions of promoting the objectives of equality, development and peace, monitoring the implementation of measures for the advancement of women, and reviewing and appraising progress made at the subregional, regional and global levels.

3. In its resolution 50/203 of 22 December 1995, the General Assembly invited the Economic and Social Council to strengthen the mandate of the Commission, inter alia, its methods of work, and requested the Commission to develop a multi-year programme of work and to forward its recommendations to the Council so that the Council could take a decision thereon. In this respect, the Secretary-General submitted to the Commission a report on the mandate, methods of work and proposed multi-year programme of work of the Commission (E/CN.6/1996/2). Taking into consideration the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the report looked at how the Commission could integrate the follow-up to the conference into its programme of work and how it could develop its catalytic role in gender mainstreaming. The report was extensively discussed at the fortieth session of the Commission, and led to the adoption of Commission agreed conclusions 1996/1[3] and Council resolution 1996/6 of 22 July 1996.

4. In its resolution 1996/6, the Economic and Social Council agreed that the Commission played a central role in the overall policy-making and follow-up in coordinating the implementation and monitoring of the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women. In the same resolution, the Council decided that the Commission should have a catalytic role in mainstreaming a gender perspective into policies and programmes. The Council also noted that the other functions of the Commission would include discussion of the system-wide medium-term plan for the advancement of women; strengthening cooperation with other relevant United Nations bodies, including the functional commissions and their respective secretariats; and supporting dialogue between the Bureau of the Commission and the Council, as well as collaboration with the chairpersons and secretariats of the other functional commissions, and other related bodies as appropriate.

5. In order to increase its effectiveness and efficiency, the Commission decided to make its discussion more focused through the introduction of substantive debate and panel discussions. At present, the experts for the panel discussions are appointed by the Secretary-General from the fields of study addressed under the critical areas of concern, taking into consideration equitable geographical distribution. They are selected from a list of nominees proposed by Governments, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations and other actors in civil society. On the basis of proposals made by the Secretariat, the selection of experts, the composition of panels and the allocation of time for dialogue are decided inter-sessionally by the Bureau of the Commission. The results of the dialogue are reflected in short, concise summaries. They also lead to the elaboration by the Commission of agreed conclusions, containing policy recommendations, which are

transmitted to the Economic and Social Council by a Commission decision.

6. The work of the Commission is supported by the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women and the Division for the Advancement of Women, within the Department of Social and Economic Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. The role of the Division is to organize expert group meetings in preparation for thematic discussion, prepare background reports and documentation, provide services for meetings and conferences, help to formulate policy recommendations, create follow-up mechanisms and monitor implementation of measures for the advancement of women and gender equality. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 50/203, the Secretary-General appointed a Special Adviser on Gender Issues in his Office in 1996. In 1997, the Secretary-General appointed the Special Adviser in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in order to further strengthen the programme on the advancement of women and the follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action with oversight of the Division and responsibilities for gender mainstreaming at the Secretariat and inter-agency level as well as for advocating strategies for gender equality goals.

II. Gender mainstreaming and implementation strategies

7. The Commission is part of a three-tiered intergovernmental mechanism including the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, whose primary role is overall policy-making in the field of the advancement of women and gender equality, and follow-up and coordination of the implementation and monitoring of the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women. The report on the follow-up to the Conference, also known as the "rolling report", which is requested under Assembly resolution 53/120 of 9 December 1998, is currently prepared as three complementary reports in the course of a year and presented on a rolling basis to the Commission, to the Council and to the Assembly. In the interest of greater efficiency it is recommended that one report be submitted to the Assembly through the Commission and the Council with addenda as necessary.

8. With the recent five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the General Assembly recognized the need to enhance the effectiveness of the work and catalytic role of the Commission with respect to the effective implementation of the Platform for Action and outcome of the twenty-third special session of the Assembly, in particular the facilitating and monitoring of gender mainstreaming.[4] Since the current working methods of the Commission had been operational for the five-year period 1996-2000, a review was recommended to enhance and strengthen the future work of the Commission, particularly in view of the new challenges and emerging issues that may impact on policy guidance and implementation. It is important that the most effective, productive and action-oriented ways and means of carrying out the Commission's functions be explored and instituted.

9. To facilitate this process, following the five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women held informal brainstorming sessions with delegates to the Commission, its Bureau, some non-governmental organizations and academicians. Relevant entities of the United Nations system were also consulted. The Division also drew from individual consultant papers evaluating the Commission's current and future work.

10. Strengthening the policy-making and monitoring role of the Commission will ensure that decisions filter to the national level and lead to the implementation of concrete commitments undertaken by all actors, particularly Governments. To enhance this potential, the Commission may consider including an implementation segment at its regular sessions, particularly in view of actions called for in the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (see, for example, paras. 66 (a), 73 (b) and 93 (c)). The Commission should give priority to gender mainstreaming in all areas of its work, providing a forum for policy guidance, dissemination of good practices and systematic monitoring.

11. The approach to the working methods should be sufficiently flexible and dynamic so the Commission would have the possibility of addressing issues other than those adopted in the multi-year programme of work, as deemed appropriate. It may also include the possibility of revisiting certain issues taken up in previous sessions. The Commission may, in addition, wish to address urgent issues not identified in the multi-year programme of work as they emerge. For example, at its forty-first and forty-second sessions, the

Commission addressed the issue of elderly women under the agenda item entitled "Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men".

III. Enhancing the working methods of the Commission

12. Policy analysis reports and other documentation, the general debate, use of panels, the format of decisions, the involvement of regional commissions, the role of the Bureau of the Commission, the Commission's interaction with other bodies, participation of non-governmental organizations and the communications procedure are integral to the Commission's work. The improvement of the methods of work should make the Commission's work more dynamic, focused, theme-related and action-oriented and therefore more relevant to the policy-making and monitoring of the implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome document at national, regional and international levels.

A. Review of policy analysis reports and other documents

13. From its inception, one of the functions of the Commission has been preparation of recommendations to the Economic and Social Council. The Commission's deliberations and decisions are informed by the contributions made by government representatives during the general debate, and the panel discussions as well as substantive reports. The policy analysis reports and the bulk of other documents for the Commission will continue to be prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women. These include the reports of expert group meetings organized by the Division on selected themes.

14. In order to increase the impact of the documentation on the outcome of the Commission's work, it is necessary that they be sufficiently reflected upon. In this regard, a number of options could be explored. The practice of inter-sessional briefings by the Secretariat on the reports submitted to the Commission has proved useful and should therefore be continued. In addition, during the session, the initial introduction of documents by the Secretariat could be followed by an interactive question-and-answer session. Discussion of papers could be included as an agenda item during the Commission's session. In order to facilitate informed discussion on some of these documents, the Commission may wish to establish an ad hoc task force system where interested Bureau members and delegates could be encouraged to organize the study of documents and take a lead in the discussions.

15. Sufficient focus on documentation is important also in order to enable the Commission to provide guidance to the work of the Secretariat as well as of the United Nations system on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and outcome document, particularly focus on such documents as the programme budget, the medium-term plan, the system-wide medium-term plan for the advancement of women, the report of the Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (IACWGE) and the report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the status of women in the United Nations system, among others.

16. The work programme of the Division for the Advancement of Women will continue to be primarily set and reviewed by the Commission. In order to facilitate the Commission's monitoring role, the Commission itself should give more attention to the work of the other two entities exclusively dealing with the advancement of women and gender equality, namely, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This would be done in observance of the full autonomy of the two bodies. The Chair of CSW may also wish to interact with counterparts in the Board of Trustees of INSTRAW and the Consultative Committee of UNIFEM.

B. General debate

17. The general debate has evolved from comprising broad, largely descriptive statements on the situation of women to encompassing a policy focus that may include two or three specific issues, drawing from national and regional experiences which are an excellent source of good practices on gender mainstreaming. The general debate provides a regular forum in which government representatives, and other

actors, can share information, particularly on the implementation of the Platform for Action. The statements made can be used as a source of inputs for resolutions and to guide the Secretariat in formulating policy proposals for consideration by the Commission.

18. A broader interest in the debate beyond the United Nations system needs to be ensured. For this purpose, the Department of Public Information of the United Nations Secretariat could be approached to develop a media strategy for the Commission. Member States should be encouraged to continue to use the opportunity of the general debate to present new initiatives and good practices in relation to gender mainstreaming. In this regard, active participation at the ministerial level from all relevant ministries — and not only gender-women-specific ministries — is needed. For example, if the theme is health or security, ministers from the respective ministries should be encouraged to attend and share their experiences and, in turn, learn the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives into these specific issues. Delegations, composed of both women and men, should be encouraged to engage in interactive dialogue, share experiences and address critical areas of importance and priority issues of particular relevance to women and gender issues. Furthermore, to ensure provocative, and substantive discussion, the statements should be focused, concise and delivered within the allotted time.

19. The idea of organizing high-level round tables to discuss case studies, good practices and lessons learned could be explored. These round tables could attract high-level participation at the ministerial level and create more interest in the general debate. Media coverage of the round-tables would increase their outreach, so as to include the country level.

C. Panels

20. The Commission adopted the use of panel discussions to examine the critical areas of concern, provide a forum for lively debate, and permit governmental representatives and experts to engage in an exchange of views. While there is a general consensus that it is useful to continue with the panel discussions as a feature of the Commission's method of work, there have been some suggestions on improving the effectiveness of panels in order to enhance their substantive input to the work of the Commission.

21. Concerns have been raised that, despite the development of guidelines for panellists, dynamic dialogue has not always taken place, partly because some panellists lack the required expertise on the given topic. The prime consideration in the selection of panellists should be expertise in the topic, and the capacity to make presentations in a provocative and innovative manner. This would ensure participation of leading experts on the substantive issues and a more dynamic and focused debate, based on exchange of ideas between different actors.

22. As an alternative to panel discussions, the idea of inviting keynote speakers with expertise in the substantive areas to lead the discussion could be considered. The keynote speakers would include leading authorities in a given field, such as Under-Secretaries-General, Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, and Special Rapporteurs on human rights.

23. There is also concern about the effectiveness of moderators in leading the panel discussions. In view of this concern, professional facilitators and trained moderators could be chosen from among experts with United Nations experience or could receive training prior to panel discussions. They should closely follow the guidelines of the panels to effectively manage them. Moderators should stimulate the discussion and summarize the main points. They should also ensure adequate allotment of time to all participants, enforce time limits on interventions, and include different actors in the discussion. Interventions from the floor should focus on comments and questions on the points addressed by the panellists. Summary of the outcomes of the debate would be issued in the form of a Chair's text.

D. Format of decisions

24. Agreed conclusions were introduced as a way of reflecting the outcome of the Commission's work and it was originally expected that they would replace resolutions. The initiation of agreed conclusions from the outset gave rise to questions on their strength and authority as compared with the strength and authority of resolutions. In the opinion of the Office of Legal Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat agreed conclusions carried the same authority as resolutions. However, the concerns about agreed conclusions have continued and resolutions are still perceived by most

delegations as the more authoritative format for reflecting the Commission's decisions.

25. Reservations regarding the continued use of agreed conclusions include the time-consuming aspect. Agreed conclusions often evolve into long, discursive texts, which require a huge amount of time to negotiate. There is also a greater risk of reopening to negotiation previously agreed language from the Platform for Action or other sources. Another concern is that because the agreed conclusions are used primarily to reflect the outcome, they contain a wide variety of views from a wide range of actors and are therefore neither as conclusive nor as action-oriented as the Commission might wish. The Commission may wish to consider adopting short, action-oriented resolutions or decisions.

E. Regional commissions

26. The ongoing regional reviews of the Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and of the regional plans of action are of particular relevance to the overall monitoring of and follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women. However, in order to enhance collaboration between the Commission and the regional commissions, new reporting modalities are needed. Reporting by the regional commissions should include progress on gender mainstreaming activities as part of an update of national action plans and emerging regional trends. Relevant statements from regional commissions might be submitted to the Commission and distributed prior to the general debate.

27. The Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, in collaboration with the regional commissions, will organize expert meetings on gender mainstreaming in each region, starting in 2001, to assess progress and support further development of approaches and methodologies. Feedback on these meetings to the Commission will provide valuable insight into regional priorities and good practices. The regional commissions should be encouraged to make available to the Commission the results of any other related seminars or workshops on gender issues held in their region.

28. The databases to be established by the regional commissions in accordance with the outcome document as a means of monitoring the promotion of gender equality at regional level should emphasize the work done to integrate gender perspectives throughout the work of the United Nations system.

29. It might also be invaluable if during the debate individual regional commissions could take on a task manager role related to the thematic issues under discussion, especially when they are of particular relevance to the respective regions. This approach could serve to highlight the linkages, in respect of implementation, between of the Platform for Action and outcome document, and the regional plans of action.

F. The Bureau of the Commission

30. The Bureau of the Commission on the Status of Women, along with the bureaux of the other functional commissions and the Bureau of the Economic and Social Council, could enhance coordination, in particular through regular joint meetings of bureaux whenever necessary. In addition to meetings, bureaux should explore the scope for coordination via informal networking arrangements.

31. The question of activities between sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women has implications for the timing of Bureau elections if continuity is to be achieved. This issue has been raised in recent years in connection with the restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations. The Commission on Sustainable Development introduced the practice of electing its Bureau at the end of a session rather than at the beginning to steer the preparations for the next session. The Commission on Narcotic Drugs recently proposed the adoption of the same practice.

32. If the Commission were to decide to adopt the practice of electing its Bureau at the end of a session, the election would have to take place in alternate years since the term of the Bureau of the Commission is two years. There would have to be a transition arrangement in place when the new procedure was introduced. To enhance continuity, the election of the members of the Bureau might also be changed to follow a staggered system whereby two members of the Bureau would be elected one year and three members the following year. This would ensure that at any given time there would be new as well as old members serving together.

G. Interaction of the Commission with other bodies

33. Owing to the integrated and coordinated approach to the follow-up of all the recent United Nations conferences, a concerted effort has been made by the functional commissions, at the request of the Economic and Social Council, to ensure the collaboration and integration of work programmes. For example, interaction and collaboration have taken place between the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Human Rights. A joint work plan of the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has been submitted annually to both Commissions for the last three years. Information has also been shared at the Secretariat level. However, such interaction might be enhanced through the preparation and presentation of joint reports.

34. Functional commissions could be encouraged to review progress made at the national, regional and international levels on specific issues under the multi-year programme of work and identify cross-cutting themes in their respective programmes of work. Priority themes could be discussed jointly with other commissions. Clear, concise and action-oriented results of these deliberations could be produced and shared.

35. The Bureau of the Commission should conduct transparent and open-ended consultations with Member States, with a view to seeking guidance from, and ensuring greater involvement of, Member States in the preparatory work of the sessions of the Commission. The Bureau of the Commission could also request the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, on its behalf, to address other commissions on the matter of mainstreaming a gender perspective into their work. The Commission could request all other functional commissions to report on how gender perspectives were being mainstreamed into their work (one functional commission per year). Briefings on gender mainstreaming, progress and constraints could be provided by the Chairperson of the Commission, in collaboration with the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, to the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ).

36. The Commission could hold "hearings" to assess progress with respect to gender mainstreaming in different parts of the United Nations system, for example, departments of the Secretariat, specialized agencies, funds and programmes. The choice of entities for hearings each year could be guided by the thematic discussion in the programme of work.

H. Advocate of the Commission

37. In order to highlight particular thematic issues that are not already covered by other commissions, the Commission may wish to appoint an Advocate or "Good Will Ambassador" from time to time to look into and raise awareness about these issues.

I. Participation of non-governmental organizations

38. Within the existing framework for the functioning of the Commission, the Economic and Social decided that, in view of the important role of non-governmental organizations in the advancement of women, such organizations should be encouraged to participate in the work of the Commission and in the monitoring and implementation process related to the Beijing Platform for Action to the maximum extent possible (Council resolution 1996/6). The Commission may wish to consider possible modalities for drawing more effectively on the knowledge of non-governmental organizations.

J. Communications procedure

39. Alleged violations of women's rights have been discussed in a closed meeting at each session of the Commission since 1982. The Working Group on Communications on the Status of Women examines the communications received and reports to the Commission. The results are reflected in the Commission's report to the Economic and Social Council, but no recommendation for action is made. The purpose and effectiveness of the communications procedure have therefore been questioned. The Commission will have before it at its forty-fifth session the Secretary-General's report on the review of the current communications procedures and recommendations on ways to improve the process (E/CN.6/2001/12).

Notes

[1] *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[2] General Assembly resolution S-23/3 of 10 June 2000, annex.

[3] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1996, Supplement No. 6* (E/1996/26), chap. I, sect. C.1.

[4] See the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women and of the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century" (A/55/341), and Assembly resolution 55/71, para. 11.